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ABSTRACT

A college expository writing instructor investigated how students perceive teacher intervention during the writing process and how written teacher comments affect successive drafts of student compositions. During the semester, four students were asked to react on tape to the comments the instructor wrote on the second drafts of their compositions and then to use those comments to write a final draft of their papers. The comments were intended to stimulate revisions that would improve the quality of the texts. However, in many cases, there were few changes and the major effect of the comments was to create dissonance in the students' minds between their perceptions of what they had written and the teacher's perceptions as a reader of the texts. The students responded to this dissonance in a variety of ways: one attempted to resolve it by trying to follow the suggestions, some attempted to defend what they had written, while others avoided dealing with the comments by deleting the sentence, word, or section of the text in question. These responses indicated that inexperienced writers do not have the strategies with which to resolve the dissonance such teacher comments create. If teacher comments are to be helpful, they should not only indicate the problems a reader is having with a text, but also suggest strategies to help the student writer solve these problems. (HTH)

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What She Thought I Said: How Students Misperceive Teachers' Written Comments

By Nina D. Ziv

Paper presented at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication, San Francisco, California, March 19, 1982

Most teachers consider written commentary to be one of the best ways of helping students to improve their writing performance. In the past, teachers usually confined their comments to the final drafts of student papers; however, with the new emphasis in writing instruction on process instead of product, they are beginning to intervene during the draft process. While studies indicate that teacher intervention is helpful (Buxton, 1958; Kelley, 1973; Beach, 1979; King, 1980), researchers have not investigated how students perceive teacher comments or how specific teacher comments affect successive drafts of student compositions.

Recently, I conducted a research project on teacher intervention during the draft process. Linda, Mark, Vincent, and Joann, the participants in the project, were students in my Expository Writing class at New York University. During the semester, I asked these students to react on tape to the comments which I wrote on the second drafts of their compositions and then to use my comments to write final drafts of their papers. In addition, I interviewed the participants at the beginning

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and end of the semester about their experiences with teacher intervention during and after the writing process. Although the original focus of my study was on how my students used teacher comments to revise their papers, as I analyzed the data, I became aware of the complexities of commenting on student writing.

My purpose in writing comments was to stimulate my students to make revisions which would improve the quality of their texts. However, when I looked at their responses to my comments and at their final drafts, I saw that in many cases, there were few changes; indeed, the major effect my comments had was to create dissonance in my students' minds between their perceptions of what they had written and my perceptions as a reader of these texts.

The students responded to this dissonance in a variety of ways. Sometimes, they would attempt to resolve it. For example, in one paper Mark discussed his impressions of St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. He began by describing his trip to the college and then wrote a few sentences about how small the college was compared to NYU. The next paragraph was concerned with the friendliness of the students at St. John's and in his last paragraph, he described in detail one of the students whom he had met there. He then concluded his essay by writing "This all goes to show you what you miss if you commute to your college."

While the various incidents Mark had presented were interesting, there was no central theme which connected them to each other. Rather, the paper appeared to be a series of random thoughts about the college which Mark had jotted down. In my final comment, I pointed out this lack of focus to him by bracketing the last sentence "This all goes to show you what you miss if you commute to your college" and asking him "Is this the central idea of your paper?" My comment then continued

> Or is the contrast between NYU and St. John's the focus? I enjoyed this essay because I knew people who went to St. John's. After reading it again though, I'm still not sure of the point of the paper.

Mark's response to my comment was

> Okay. I'm glad you pointed it out. You wrote that you didn't know what the main theme was. It's a general comment about what to do. You asked me whether it was the last sentence or not so I'm gong to try to find out what I was trying to say. I guess I really wasn't too sure. I'm going to try to put in an idea in the final draft,

and in final draft, he attempted to "put in an idea" by adding the sentence "I will try to describe his college to you because I think his college has some very unique features as well as one common one" to the first paragraph and by substituting the sentence "I hope you enjoyed the account of my journey to my friends college as much as I enjoyed going" for the final sentence of the essay. From Mark's reactions to my comments and his subsequent actions on his next draft, it was clear that

my comment had helped Mark realize that I was having trouble perceiving the thematic intentions of his text; however, because he was an inexperienced reviser he did not know how to make changes that would give his essay the focus it needed.

In some cases, students reacted to the dissonance by defending what they had written. Thus in a paper on frisbee playing, Mark kept switching from an objective description of frisbee playing to a discussion of his personal involvement in the sport. As a reader, I found that the order of the paper was confusing so I commented "Do you think the organization of the essay is stafisfactory?" intending that he group his facts about frisbee playing together and then talk about his own experiences as a frisbee player. Mark did not see anything wrong with what he had written:

> You asked me "Do you think the organization of the essay is satisfactory?" It's not as organized as it could be but it's in fairly good order,

and in his final draft, he did not make any structural changes in his essay.

Finally, there were times when students avoided dealing with my comments by deleting the sentence, word, or section of the text in question. For example, in a paper on his experiences as a track runner, Vincent wrote the

following sentence: "And lastly, I had three older sisters who never played any sport, so if anything they were a negative sports influence." I thought that the sentence was unclear because of the phrase "they were a negative sports influence" so I commented "Rewrite this sentence" intending that Vincent delete the phrase and substitute "They had a negative influence on my interest in sports" or some other equivalent phrase. For Vincent, my comment was frustrating:

> I really don't see what's wrong with it. Uh, the comment doesn't say whether it's awkward or whether it's too long or something...Uh, sometimes when you have "rewrite the sentence" I get frustrated and I just delete it which isn't the best thing to do but that's what I do sometimes. I leave it out

and in the final draft, he deleted the sentence.

In her study on revision, Sommers (1980) found that inexperienced revisers do not make major revisions because they do not sense any dissonance between their intentions and the execution of these intentions in their texts. Yet my interaction with inexperienced revisers shows that creating such dissonance in the minds of these writers is not enough because they do not have the strategies with which to resolve it.

If teacher comments are to be helpful, then they should not only indicate the problems a reader is having with a text but should also suggest strategies which

would help the student writer solve these problems. For example, in order to help Mark find a theme for his paper, a teacher might suggest

> Mark-You have described several incidents in this paper about your trip to St. John's. However there is no central theme connecting them to each other. Freewriting about your trip may help you to discover what you are trying to say.

In response to Mark's problem with the organization of his essay on frisbee playing, a teacher might comment:

> Mark-the organization of the essay is confusing because you keep switching back and forth from a description of frisbee playing to a discussion of your personal involvement in the sport. Try rearranging the paragraphs so that the reader gets a clear picture of what the game of frisbee is. Then go on to discuss your personal involvement with it.

On the lexical level, teachers might comment on a student's word choice by listing alternative word choices for the ones a student has written while on the sentential level, teachers might suggest using the revision strategies of rearrangement, deletion, substitution, or addition in order to make a sentence less awkward or clearer to the reader. Thus in order to help Vincent with his sentence a teacher might write:

> Vincent- I'm not sure what you mean by "negative sports influence." You might try substituting a phrase which would clarify what your sisters had a negative influence on.

The comments I have just mentioned are prototypes of the kinds of responses which I believe will help inexperienced revisers to rewrite their papers. When

students become more experienced at revision, it might be sufficent to write "abbreviated" comments such as "Awkward," "You've no central theme in this paper," and "confusing," because presumably students will have a repertoire of revision strategies they can use to solve the problems in their texts.

My findings suggest that the comments teachers have been writing have not been helpful to student writers. Since commenting is one of the most important activities that composition teachers engage in, more research needs to be done in the classroom to test the manner of responding I have suggested and other kinds of responses so that a language of commenting can be developed which all teachers can use in their classroom.

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